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Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles is Key to Disease Prevention

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Public health experts agree that prevention is crucial in fighting obesity and other health-related concerns, as well as decreasing the exorbitant costs of health care. Likewise, medical research indicates that people who maintain active, healthy lifestyles dramatically reduce their risk of contracting chronic diseases.

Treating these diseases is important, but we must also explore ways to prevent them in the first place. Disease prevention and promotion of healthy lifestyles offer an excellent opportunity to begin reversing the steep rise in health care costs we face today.

With this in mind, I have introduced the Workforce Health Improvement Program (WHIP) Act (S. 772), which would allow for the favorable tax treatment of health club memberships as an employee benefit.

This legislation would clarify an employer's right to deduct the cost of subsidizing or providing health club benefits for their employees. In addition, it would exclude the wellness benefit from being considered as income for employees. In other words, employer contributions to the cost of health club fees would not be taxable income for employees – creating an incentive for more employers to contribute employee health.

Current law already permits businesses to deduct the cost of on-site workout facilities, which are provided for employee benefit on a pre-tax basis. However, if a business wants (or needs) to outsource these health benefits, they and/or their employees are required to bear the full cost.

The WHIP Act would correct this inequity in the current tax code – to the benefit of many smaller businesses and their employees. It also would be an important step in reversing the devastating health trend that our country is facing, through the promotion of physical activity and disease prevention.

But the key to prevention also includes addressing habits that are cultivated early in life – even in childhood. If we are to combat the public health crisis of obesity, we must

also focus on our children. Over the past 20 years, obesity has risen significantly in the United States. Among children and teens aged 6 to 19 years, 15 percent are overweight, according to the 1999-2000 data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – triple the 1980 proportion.

While it is critical that our children are proficient in the basic subjects of mathematics, English, and science, it is also important they have access to quality physical and health education programs that build the foundation for healthy lifestyles.

To ensure that a national guideline for these standards is implemented, recently I filed the Physical Education in Schools Bill (S. 1276), that would: require states participating in No Child Left Behind to adopt standards in physical education, beginning in the 2006-2007 school year; require that states include in their state plan, as required by NCLB, content standards and performance standards for physical education; and require physical education academic assessments, beginning in the 2008-2009 school year, just as students are currently assessed on knowledge and skills related to reading, math, and science.

Given the tremendous benefits exercise provides, I believe we in Congress have a duty to create as many incentives as possible to get Americans off the couch, up, and moving. As a member of the Task Force on Health Care Costs and the Uninsured, I will continue to explore ways to promote physically activity, improve health care costs, and reform our health care system to make certain that every individual has access to quality medical services, regardless of race, age, or medical condition – with an emphasis on strengthening individual choice and access. It is my hope that these legislative initiatives provide promise as we move forward on the path to encourage healthy living.

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